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The Effect of National History Courses in Turkey and Other Countries on the Formation Process of National States

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Abstract

Many European states tried to establish their own nation-states by making the people internalize the new values and new state understanding emerging in this formation process of nation states at the 19th century, in particular. These states which attached a great importance to the process of placing these new values and state understanding in the minds of the people and conveying them to the future generations used many different methods to fulfill their goals. Without doubt, the most important means used by the states to this end has become the national history courses. With the Turkish Revolution led by Atatürk, similar developments were also observed in Turkey and it was aimed at creating awareness in Turkish community in this respect through the national history courses and developing a national identity for the Turkish people and establishing the targeted national state.

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1. Introduction

The nation-state understanding has been based on the nationalism which started to spread as of the 19th century. This movement led to the collapse of kingdoms and establishment of separate states for each nation in Europe. This new order was defined as modernization and it started to spread to the whole world from Europe (Çelik, 2009: 145).

It can be expressed that the most important characteristics of nation states which came out depending on the developments in Europe and is still the most common state model are “Being a centralized and constitutional state”,

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“Administration with an Assembly through a parliamentary functioning”, “Being based on a national community” and “Following a secular policy” (Köken, 2002: 64).

When Europe was heavily hit by nationalist uprisings at the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire which was seen as the dominant power of the Islam World considered these events as internal affairs of Europe and did not follow these developments closely (Çelik, 2009: 146).

2.Nation State- National History

Following the nationalist movements which started to spread after the Enlightenment and French Revolution triggered by a series of events including Geographical Discoveries, Renaissance and Reform in Europe, a cultural change has taken place as in all other fields. During the formation of nation states, Western communities displayed their cultural differences and started to discuss their national histories intensely (Köken, 2002: 31).

The concept of nation state refers to a community which actually started with the establishment of national monarchies at the end of the Middle Age and has been organized and integrated in accordance with the nationalizations principle in its modern sense. Although it appeared at the end of the Middle Age, it can be said that this state model has been shaped completely as a new phenomenon at the 19th century with industrializations and capitalizations following the collapse of feudalism in Western Europe (Köken, 2002: 66).

National state needs a cultural integrity which will give prominence to the integrity sense of a socially and politically integrated community to survive. Thus, national states had to lean over the history in order to reveal the roots of national culture and to find out a legitimacy basis appropriate for the nation desired to be formed. Therefore, national history gained more importance at the 19th century during which nationalism and democracy ideas spread rapidly, empires dissolved and nation-states were established. As a result, resorting to the national history has become a common method for each country aiming at enhancing national integrity and spiritual power as well as taking new steps. One of the most important factors integrating a community is the common history consciousness. Besides, the fact that the Italians, the Germans and the Slavic people wrote their national histories even before establishing their political, national integrities shows that history is one of the most important factors to develop a national identity (Köken, 2002: 78–79).

3. National History Understanding in Turkey and Other Countries

The most fundamental characteristic of French history writing at the 19th century has been the intense impact of French Revolution. This impact has affected the nationalist viewpoint, in particular. Contemporary history writing also started in line with nationalist approaches of the 19th century in the Ottoman Empire. The modern Turkey can not be kept out of this generalisation. In Modern Turkey, the establishment of nation-state and re-writing of the history are also concurrent (Behar, 1996: 19).

Throughout the world, it has been a common method to resort to history as a means of benefiting from history to deepen the nation-state understanding or revealing the legitimacy of the revolution. For instance, many countries ranging from America to Asia formed books out of speeches and statements of leaders and published them to create such an impact. The first one of these books included speeches and statements of Washington, the first president of the U.S. and was published in 1837 (<http://www.archives.gov/nhprc>). Another example is France where the date of French Revolution, the 14th of July, was proclaimed a fete and a revolution history chair was established in Sorbonne University several years later. Besides, in Russia, museums were opened to introduce the Bolshevik Revolution dated 1917 to the community (Oral, 2001: 323). In Turkey, it is also seen that Revolution Institutes were established in 1933 and 1942 with the similar purposes.

Likewise, during the 20th century, history became the biggest and most important guide and power source of the independence wars of many state leaders including Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, Theodore Roosevelt, a president of the USA, English Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Mahatma Gandhi, the founder of India. All of these leaders attached immense importance to the history education and researches in their own countries. On the other hand, lately, the American leader Ronald Reagan and English Margaret Thatcher interfered with the curriculum of history education in the schools in accordance with their policies and tried to prove the legitimacy of their policies to some extent (Aslan, 2006: 163).

At the second half of the 19th century, history education increased in directly proportional to the increase of nationalism in Europe. At this period, history started to draw attention as a scientific discipline in the academic world. In other words, history education has become a way of creating and enhancing a national identity in Europe (Behar, 1996: 20–21).

In 1824, Leopold von Ranke stated in the preface of his first book “The History of Latin and Teutonic Tribes” that: “*History was commissioned to judge the past and direct the present time in favor of the future...*”. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Modern Republic of Turkey, explained his reason of writing his book “Nutuk” as such: “*I intend to write down my memories by arranging the written and preserved documents of the events which took place as of that date, addressingg the events of the day when I left Istanbul completely separately. I accept this a duty for the next generations and the history of Turkish Republic.*” With such remarks, Ranke and Atatürk emphasized the mission attributed to the history as well as the expectations from it (Behar, 1996: 21; *Speeches and Statements of Atatürk*, 1997: 99).

The strict relationship between history and nationalism in Europe was firstly formulated in the history understandings in Germany and France. These two states provided inspiration for the other European countries as well as the other countries in the world. For instance, the French impact on the attempts to re-write the history of the first ten years of the republic in Turkey is so intense and clear. Similarly, at the second half of the 1930s, the German understanding of history which gives an epical character to the state power became effective on the re-writing process of the Turkish history with the effect of the importance attached to the culture policies (Behar, 1996: 22). It is possible to say that the four-volume book titled “General Outlines of Turkish History” was prepared to be lectured at the secondary education institutions in line with this effect.

At the beginning of the 20th century, C.Seignobos emphasized how important the history education could be as a tool in political education and stated that the history explains the community to the students with its transformations and criticism. According to him, the course of history was commissioned to introduce the nations, state and governments to the students and had a mission of preparing the students for political life and responsibility (Behar, 1996: 32). At this point, it can be expressed that Turkish politicians and historians have been affected by these opinions. For instance, one of the important politicians of the first years of the Turkish republic, Recep Peker specified his expectations from such courses of history in a similar way to Seignobos: “*Our expectation is to instill the enthusiasm and excitement which were the strongest stimuli lying at the spirit of people who lived the Revolution period and paved the way for that period into the young Turkish generations who will put these factors into practice, to train them with the revolutionary principles which are the product of that period and to prepare them for their duties and tasks... The aim of the Turkish Revolution history courses given to the university and higher education students is to instill the main wisdom of Turkish state into the young citizens and to enable them to internalize this wisdom. We should convey the heat and excitement of our independence and resurrection period from generation to generation.*” (Eroğlu, 2008: 4-5).

Likewise, Ernest Lavis who was also contemporary with Seignobos, is named as national primary school teacher in France and is known as the founder of the French nationalist ideal considered history as a guide for political education which aims at raising national awareness (Behar, 1996: 33).

In addition to Western Europe, the close relationship between the science of history and nationalism was also proved in the Eastern Europe countries. Examples of these countries are Slavic countries and Hungary. Furthermore, Polish, Czechoslovakian and Hungarian historians revealed and explained their histories by investigating their primitive ages. Therefore, the historians of these countries comprehended the educative role of history to some extent (Behar, 1996: 38-39).

In the Turkish Republic which was established following the revolution led by Atatürk, it was also attempted to infuse the stages of the Turkish revolution and the regime into the nation with the help of national history courses as in many other countries.

It was attempted to infuse the consciousness of Turkish revolution into the Turkish nation which got rid of the bad memories of the past by establishing a new state through the revolution history courses (Mumcu, 1996: 147).

At the 1930s, in particular, Atatürk started to attach a peculiar importance to the culture policies. This situation can be explained by the fact that Atatürk considered culture policies as a means of infusing the revolution and reforms into the people. In line with this purpose of Atatürk, Turkish Historical Society was established on the 15th April 1931, Turkish Community Centers were established on the 19th February 1932 and Turkish Language Society was opened on the 12th July 1932 (Akşin, 2007: 205-207). Activities carried out especially in the field of history in the Turkish Republic based on a single nation can be listed among the activities on which Atatürk concentrated at most. With these activities and studies, the centuries old Anatolian history was enlightened and, to some extent, they paved the way for the birth of a national culture (Mumcu, 1996: 148-149).

The aims of the Revolution History courses which are currently lectured in the Turkish education institutions are to provide correct information about Turkish Independence War, Atatürk's Principles and Reforms, Atatürkist Ideology and the History of Turkish Republic, to gather the Turkish youth around national targets in an indivisible integrity with its country, nation and state in line with Atatürk's Principles and Reforms and Atatürkist ideology and to train students accordingly (Köstüklü, 1991: 36).

Thus, the overall purpose is to help the people internalize the new state and nation understanding which appeared during the formation process of the Turkish Republic and convey this understanding to the future generations by constantly emphasizing the contributions of the heterogeneous community which consists of equal and identical citizens and is defined as Turk.

Conclusion

The concept of nation states emerged at the 19th century as a new phenomenon with industrialisation and capitalisation following the collapse of feudalism in Western Europe. The national history gained more importance in this period during which nationalism and democracy ideas spread rapidly, empires collapsed and nation states were established.

In Europe, at the second half of the 19th century, history education increased in directly proportional to the popularity of nationalist movements. History education has become a means of creating and strengthening a national identity in Europe. The strict relationship between history and nationalism was firstly formulated at the history understandings of Germany and France in Europe. These two states set model for the other European countries as well as the other countries in the world.

Thus, the Turkish Republic which was established under the leadership of Atatürk also followed a similar understanding in history writing. It was aimed at infusing the new nation and state understandings into the Turkish community with the new books as well as the revolution history courses which are still lectured in the schools.

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